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MORE THAN A SEX-STRIKE: A CASE OF MEDICAL PATHOLOGY IN *LYSISTRATA**

Abstract: In this article I consider the sex-strike in Lysistrata in the light of contemporary medical theories. I suggest that the young women who perform the sex-strike feature as (symbolic) Hippocratic patients who struggle with the symptoms of the condition of the “wandering womb”. Although some scholars have noted the medical vocabulary with regard to male pathology in Lysistrata, there is no study to date which considers the female sex-strike in the context of medical pathology. Through the perpetuation of the women’s pathological condition by means of the sex-strike and the overt manifestation of their disease, men are forced to fully comprehend and appreciate the importance of the reproductive role of women in the city. In this way, the traditional medical idea of the female as an unstable object, always in need of being brought into equilibrium and stability, is manipulated in the play by the women, who make the men realize the dangers their war policy entails: far from just threatening them with suspension of sex, the women force the men to face the real danger, sterility and cessation of reproduction.

Few Aristophanic plays have divided scholarship more deeply than *Lysistrata* and its (in)famous sex strike.¹ The play has been simultaneously viewed as advancing a proto-feminist agenda and as an early example of pornography that suppresses feminine subjectivity and substantiates the dominant patriarchal ideology. Multiple interpretations have been offered as to the role of the young women in the play: they have been viewed as pseudo-hetairai, who trade their sexual favours for peace instead of money and material goods;² as a combination of priestesses and prostitutes, that manipulate ritual and sexual codes;³ as regressing to the state of παρθένοι in order to renew their bonds of marriage and resume their legitimate positions in the city;⁴ and as assuming the role of ritual practitioners and mythical female

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¹ Aristophanes is quoted from the Oxford Classical Text of Wilson (2007); quotations from the Hippocratic corpus come from Littré’s edition (1961 and 1962). All translations are taken from the Digital Loeb Classical Library, except for *Diseases of Women* 2, where translations are my own.

² Stroup (2004).

³ Faraone (2006) and Gilhuly (2009).

⁴ Loraux (1993).

prototypes.⁵ In general, while the older women are regarded as reverent, heroic figures,⁶ the portrayal of the young citizen wives is generally negative, as they appear foolish and slaves to their bodily desires. Indeed, most recently it has been argued that the success of the female leadership should be mostly attributed to the occupation of the Acropolis and the extra-sexual negotiations of the older Athenian women.⁷ In this article I wish to offer a reading of female leadership that does more justice to the role of the young women, redeems the important position of the sex-strike in the context of the play, and preserves, to a certain extent, a notion of proto-feminism. I suggest that the young women who perform the sex-strike feature (symbolically) as Hippocratic patients who struggle with the symptoms of the condition of the “wandering womb”. Although some scholars have noted the medical vocabulary with regard to *male* pathology in *Lysistrata*,⁸ there is no study to date which considers the *female* sex-strike in the context of medical pathology. Medicine is, however, one of the many possible filters of the play. Through the perpetuation of the women’s pathological condition by means of the sex-strike and the overt manifestation of their disease, men are forced to fully comprehend and appreciate the importance of the reproductive role of women in the city. In this way, the traditional medical idea of the female as an unstable object, always in need of being brought into equilibrium and stability, is manipulated in the play by the women, who make the men realize the dangers their war policy entails: far from just threatening them with suspension of sex, the women force the men to face the real danger, sterility and cessation of reproduction. Soon after the implementation of the sex-strike, the men also exhibit pathological symptoms due to lack of sexual intercourse. Finally, the sickness both of men and women becomes a metaphor for the desperate situation the city is faced with because of the war. The extended medical vocabulary points to the fact that the city itself is the great patient and in need of a treatment.

Aristophanes and medicine: the paradox of the sex-strike

⁵ Thesmophoria and Adonia: Foley (1982); Bowie (1993); Goff (2004); Reitzammer (2008) and (2016); Gilhuly (2009). For myths of gynaecocracy and relevant rituals see Bowie (1984) and (1993); Martin (1987). For the idea that Myrrhine and Lysistrata’s names evoke the priestesses of Athena Nike and Athena Polias respectively at the time of the production see Papademetriou (1948–1949) 146–153 and Lewis (1955).

⁶ See Faraone (1997) and Henderson (1980).

⁷ Henderson (1987a) and (1987b); Faraone (1997) and (2006); Stroup (2004).

⁸ Miller (1945); Byl (1990); Zimmermann (1992) 517.

The paradox of the sex-strike against men who are away at war has occasioned much comment⁹ and elicited various interpretations.¹⁰ I argue that the plan relies on a purely medical idea: the women suffer from the lack of sexual intercourse and choose the prolongation of this abstinence as a way to deal with it; they fight the “evil” with the same “evil”, use the cause of the problem as the solution for it. The principle is the same as that of homeopathy: that likes have an impact on likes is a fundamental Greek belief,¹¹ which was also utilized by the Hippocratics as an explanation for a whole range of issues, from disease causation to the growth of the human body (*Morb. Sacr.* 18.3; *Nat. Puer.* 17.1; *Morb.* 4.33.2-3). Most importantly, the homeopathic principle was put forward by the Hippocratics as a remedy: it proposed to cure a disease with the same thing which caused the disease in the first place. For example, in *Nat. Hom.* 6.3, the function of drugs in the body is explained through homeopathy: whenever a drug is introduced into the body, it first brings out whatever is particularly similar to it and then it draws it out and cleanses the rest. The cure is effected through the homeopathic therapeutics of the drugs.

In this light, fighting sexual deprivation with sexual abstinence in *Lysistrata* is not a paradox at all: it is just an application of the homeopathic way of thinking. Significantly, the homeopathic cure is found to be clearly at work in a number of gynaecological treatises: it was applied in cases of illnesses which were believed to originate in the womb and in the female genitalia.¹² As I will show, this is the case with the young women in *Lysistrata* too.

⁹ See, for example, Hulton (1972); Vaio (1973); Rosellini (1979); Moulton (1981); Foley (1982); Loraux (1993).

¹⁰ Henderson (1980) 179-80 argues: “It is the importance of domestic life that will provide the major theme of the play and the strongest case against the war. [...] Aristophanes needs to stage homes disrupted by war to motivate a plot in which homes will be disrupted by wives”. Bowie (1993) suggests an explanation for the paradox based on myths of gynaecocracy: “Aristophanes combines this motif of the “absence” of men with the motif of the disruption of normal sexual relations, and thus produces what in “realist” terms is a paradox, but in mythological and ritual terms is a standard feature: there is disruption *both* in the civic sphere (men absent from political centre) *and* in the domestic (suspension of sexual relations)”.

¹¹ Cf. the story of Telephus, who can only be healed by the spear of Achilles which had wounded him. For an account of the homeopathy issue in tragedy see Guardasole (2000). See Faraone (1991) 5-10 for the operation of the homeopathic principle in Greek magic.

¹² These therapies entailed treating the patient’s impurity (since women genitalia were generally considered to be dirty, and birth, intercourse and menstruation were often thought as sources of pollution) with impurities, such as ill-smelling substances and dangerous plants. For more information see Von Staden (1992) 13-20; Kosak (2004) 117-21.

There are strong grounds to think along the lines of medical pathology. In the second half of the play, where the women have already put the sex-strike into effect, Lysistrata pronounces her diagnosis: βινητιῶμεν (715). The word is a comic formation playing on the vogue for verbs in -iān designating maladies (like ὀφθαλμ-ιάω (ὀφθαλμία) ‘to suffer from ophthalmia, to have eye problems’, or στραγγουρ-ιάω (στραγγουρία) ‘to suffer from strangury’).¹³ What Lysistrata actually says is “we are sick with sexual abstinence”, “we suffer from the lack of sex or ‘fuckosis’”.¹⁴ This statement aligns well with the fundamental Hippocratic belief that a woman’s health was closely linked to sexual intercourse and reproduction. By contrast with men, “women are much more at risk from too little sexual activity and their therapy often includes recommendation for intercourse, in forms similar to “let her go to her husband” rather than to use sexual pleasure”¹⁵ in whatever way. Before I elaborate on the technical details of the women’s pathologies, I cite Dean-Jones’ further remarks on the subject, which are most relevant to the situation in *Lysistrata*:

“In denying women the possibility of mastering their own sexual appetites, the Hippocratic model further justifies their subordinate position to men. Women could not rebel and refuse to grant their husbands their sexual favours because this would backfire on the women themselves, who would eventually be the more incapable of suppressing their need for their spouse”.¹⁶

What then if women did rebel against their husbands and refused to satisfy their sexual appetites? This is exactly what *Lysistrata* is about. In the light of the Hippocratic equation between female health and sexual intercourse, it is hard to consider the outcomes of such a decision out of a medical context.

Women as patients

I begin by offering a brief overview of the Hippocratic views about the female bodies, including the condition of the “wandering womb”, its causes and its recommended treatment, and, subsequently, I move on to show how the medical theories find their application in the case of the women in *Lysistrata*.

¹³ Henderson (1987a) 164. For verbs in -iāω in Aristophanes denoting a state of physical or mental illness see Willi (2007) 85-6.

¹⁴ So Willi (2007) 85.

¹⁵ Dean-Jones (1992) 79.

¹⁶ Dean-Jones (1992) 80.

One aspect of female physiology on which all Hippocratics agreed was that the female body was moister in comparison to that of men's.¹⁷ The evidence for this moist nature of women was the menstrual flow¹⁸. The Hippocratics thought that the mechanism of menstruation, which allowed the blood to flow all over the woman's body and into the womb, made it possible for a woman to maintain her health.¹⁹ However, if there was a pathological condition, the "mouth" of the womb could close and, in this case, the menses were retained and blood could not pass out of the womb.²⁰ A woman could experience such menstrual difficulties if she were not married, around the age of marriage or a little later.²¹ Thus, a girl should be married as soon as she reached the age of marriage,²² since the best treatment for the retention of the menses was sexual intercourse which would possibly lead to pregnancy and parturition:²³ through intercourse, the blood was heated, its passage was made easier and the mouth of the womb was kept open, so that no blood was retained; during pregnancy menses did not crowd into the womb all at once and after parturition the female body could bear the accumulation of blood more easily.²⁴

Apart from the retention of menses, another condition that commonly afflicted women originated in the womb itself. As women's constitution was mostly humid, this innate moisture had to be preserved under a certain balance for their bodies (and minds) to function properly. Therefore, if, for some reason, the female womb was not adequately moistened, it became dry and started to move inside the body, because it got attracted to the moister organs. This is what the Hippocratics called the "wandering womb".²⁵ The displacement of the womb was facilitated when the passages, which supposedly connected the womb to all parts of the body through φλέβια and φλέβες, were further widened due to prolonged menstruation or lochia. Thus, the women who were more

¹⁷ [Hp.] *Nat. Puer.* 15 (7.494.13-5). This was often attributed to women's loose flesh and their more inactive, indoor lifestyle. See Dean-Jones 1994: 56-9, 123.

¹⁸ See Dean-Jones (1994) 55.

¹⁹ See Dean-Jones (1994) 64, 152-3.

²⁰ See Dean-Jones (1994) 50-3, 69, 126-7.

²¹ [Hp.] *Virg.* 1.10-3 (8.466.2). See Dean-Jones (1994) 48-9.

²² [Hp.] *Virg.* 1.40-5 (8.468.23-470.1).

²³ [Hp.] *Virg.* 1.42-5 ἢν γὰρ κυήσωσιν, ὑγιέες γίνονται [...] τῶν δὲ ἡνδρωμένων γυναικῶν αἱ στειρᾶι μᾶλλον ταῦτα πάσχουσιν, "for if they become pregnant, they recover [...] among married women, the barren ones suffer more these things".

²⁴ [Hp.] *Mul.* 1 (8.10). See Dean-Jones (1994) 126-7.

²⁵ [Hp.] *Mul.* 7 (8.32), 137 (8.308). The concept of the mobile womb is also found in Plato, *Tim.* 91B-D. See Carson (1990) 139, 143; King (1998) 214-22; Dean-Jones (1994) 69-77.

susceptible to suffering from a displaced womb were older παρθένοι, women who had once been sexually active but had ceased, and widows who had had children.²⁶ For the women who suffered from a displaced womb the most successful treatment, according to the Hippocratics, was frequent sexual intercourse, which would keep the womb moist, and pregnancy, which could anchor the womb in its place.²⁷

The young women in *Lysistrata* are “high risk” patients insofar as they are all married women with children, whose husbands are away because of the war (99-101):²⁸

τοὺς πατέρας οὐ ποθεῖτε τοὺς τῶν παιδίων
ἐπὶ στρατιᾶς ἀπόντας; εὖ γὰρ οἶδ’ ὅτι
πάσαισιν ὑμῖν ἐστὶν ἀποδημῶν ἀνὴρ.

Don’t you all pine for your children’s fathers when they’re off
at war? I’m sure that every one of you has a husband away
from home.

The women confirm the problematic domestic situation and admit that they greatly miss their husbands (102-6). Two other sexual outlets, lovers and dildos (107-10) are also crossed off the list. The situation, as it is, does not allow women to satisfy their sexual appetites.²⁹ The women’s crude

²⁶ [Hp.] *Mul.* 2 (8.14) ἐπὶ οὖν γυναῖκι ἀτόκῃ ἐούσῃ κρυφθῇ τὰ ἐπιμήνια καὶ μὴ δύνῃται ὁδὸν ἕξω εὐρεῖν, νοῦσος γίνεται, “for a woman who has not had children, if her menses are retained and cannot find a way out, she gets sick”; *Mul.* 2.7 (8.14) ἢν [...] μὴ μίσγηται ἢ γυνὴ τῷ ἀνδρὶ, καὶ κενωθῇ ἡ κοιλία μᾶλλον τοῦ καιροῦ ὑπὸ τευ παθήματος, στρέφονται αἱ μήτραι, “if the woman does not have sexual intercourse with her husband, and her abdomen becomes empty for longer than it should because of that condition, her womb is displaced”; *Nat. Mul.* 3.3 (7.314) γίνεται δὲ τὸ τοιοῦτον πάθος παρθένοισι μάλιστα παλαιῇσιν ἐούσῃσι, ἢν νέαι ἐοῦσαι καὶ τοκήσσαι χηρεύουσιν “this happens to unmarried women, especially if they are advanced in age and widowed, but also if they are young and widowed after having had children”; *Virg.* 1 (8.466.10-2) αἱ δὲ παρθένοι, ὁκόσησιν ὥρη γάμου, παρανδρούμεναι, τοῦτο μᾶλλον πάσχουσιν ἅμα τῇ καθόδῳ τῶν ἐπιμηνίων, πρότερον οὐ μάλα ταῦτα κακοπαθεύουσαι, “when young women in the season of marriage remain without a husband, they suffer, in particular at the time of the downward passage of their menses, this evil to which before they were not very subject”.

²⁷ [Hp.] *Mul.* 2.7-15 (8.14-6); *Nat. Mul.* 3 (7.314). See King (1998) 221; Dean-Jones (1994) 71-2, 126-7.

²⁸ If we follow Loraux’s view ((1993) 166) that when the women vote to follow the plan of the sex strike they regress to the state of *parthenos*, the women, as figurative *parthenoi*, have increased chances of suffering from the affliction of the wandering womb.

²⁹ The key feature of *Lysistrata*’s plan and what determines its success is the fact that sex is pictured only as a legitimate heterosexual union; the idea of sex outside marriage, though contemplated, is impossible: men and women can only satisfy their sexual needs with their wives and husbands respectively. See Henderson (1980) 177.

comments (21-8) should be understood in this context. Far from just communicating the stereotypical sexual licentiousness of women, they speak for the absence of men in the city – and thus of marital intercourse.

Lysistrata's choice of words, when laying out her plan to the women, reveals one more link between sexual deprivation and medical pathology (26-7):

ἀλλ' ἔστιν ὑπ' ἐμοῦ πρᾶγμα³⁰ ἀνεζητημένον
πολλαῖσι τ' ἀγρυπνίαισιν ἐρριπτασμένον.

No, it's something I've been thinking hard about, tossing it around night after sleepless night.

The statement has obvious sexual connotations but, at the same time, evokes a pathological state: the expression ῥιπτάζειν ἑαυτόν is used in medical texts for patients who cannot sleep because of their sickness and toss themselves about in bed.³¹

Most importantly, the sex-strike is conceptualized more as a solution to the women's sexual deprivation than the problem of the war – though of course the two are strictly connected.³² When Lysistrata explains to the Proboulos their motives, she says that the women decided to take action only when the lack of men in the city was openly acknowledged (523-6):

ὅτε δὴ δ' ὑμῶν ἐν ταῖσιν ὁδοῖς φανερώς ἠκούομεν ἤδη
“οὐκ ἔστιν ἀνὴρ ἐν τῇ χώρᾳ.” — “μὰ Δι' οὐ δὴτ' <ἐσθ'>” ἕτερός
τις —,
μετὰ ταῦθ' ἡμῖν εὐθὺς ἔδοξεν σῶσαι τὴν Ἑλλάδα κοινῇ
ταῖσι γυναιξὶν συλλεχθείσαις. ποῖ γὰρ καὶ χρὴν ἀναμεῖναι;

But then, when we began to hear you in the streets openly crying, “There isn't a man left in the land,” and someone else saying, “God knows, there isn't, not a one,” after that we women decided to lose no more time, and to band together to save Greece. What was the point of waiting any longer?

It is the lack of men and the decreasing prospects of marriage, sex and procreation due to the continuation of the war that make the women

³⁰ For the sexual connotations of πρᾶγμα see Henderson (1991) 116.

³¹ See [Hp.] *Morb.* 2.17; 2.69; 3.1. Cf. the even more common in the Hippocratic corpus ῥιπτασμός (*Acut.* 15.9; *Acut.* [Sp.] 7.38; *Epid.* 4.1.20; 5.1.43, 5.1.55; 7.1.10, 7.1.77, 7.1.89; *Coac.* 81.1; *Morb.* 3.15; *Alim.* 26.2; *Judic.* 10.3).

³² See Konstan (1995) 47 “The women's primary motive for ending the hostilities between the Athenian and Spartan alliances is sex”.

revolt and seize power in the city.³³ And it is the danger of the cessation of reproduction that the sex-strike wishes to accentuate. If the women's "disorder" was thought to come about due to lack of (frequent) intercourse and absence of pregnancy and childbirth, then the women would be sick until they were treated – through sexual intercourse and childbirth.

Sex-crazed women: symptoms and side-effects

According to the medical literature, women who suffered from retained menses experienced loss of reason.³⁴ At *Mul.* 2.182 (8.364.14-5) a woman is pictured as suffering from anxiety, depression and despair because, supposedly, she has black bile in her womb. Although individuals of both sexes could be subject to bouts of delirium, and turn violent due to excess of black bile,³⁵ women were at greater risk, because the menses could turn them savage.³⁶ Another side-effect of sexual abstention was the masculinization of women. There are two cases recorded in the *Epidemics*³⁷ of women who grew hairier and whose voices grew deeper because their husbands left them and their menses stopped.³⁸

That wild and violent acts were attributed in medical texts to women who did not have "timely" or regular sexual intercourse is hardly surprising. In literature and mythology marriage features as the only solution for a woman in order to escape from her wild state and be introduced to civilized life.³⁹ Girls before marriage were perceived to be in a wild, uncultivated state, and had to be harnessed and tamed by their husbands.⁴⁰ Marriage was a girl's τέλος; to renounce marital life altogether

³³ Cf. l. 641-51 where the women enumerate a series of ritual services, which are strongly connected with their roles as wives and mothers, in order to assert their claim to leadership. On ritual practices as the source of the women's superiority over the men in the play, especially with regard to fertility and productivity, see Tsoumpra 2014: 18-97.

³⁴ [Hp.] *Virg.* 1.25-35 (8.468).

³⁵ [Hp.] *Prorrh.* 1.123 (5.552.5-554.1).

³⁶ See Dean-Jones (1994) 133.

³⁷ [Hp.] *Epid.* 6.8.32 (5.356).

³⁸ Aristotle also connects the suppression of menses with the development of masculine traits in women (*GA* 746b27-9, 747a-3; *HA* 518a33-5). See Dean-Jones (1994) 134.

³⁹ See Segal (1981) 31-6 and (1986) 71-2; Detienne (1994) xiv-xxv and xxxix (intr.) and, on the opposition in the marriage ritual between the wild and civilized life, see 116-17. For the wedding as dramatizing the bride's transition from wildness to civilized life see also Carson (1990) 149-53.

⁴⁰ A common metaphor for a girl's upbringing was the taming of a filly, while the sexual act in the context of marriage was perceived as an έργον, a "task" (*Xen. Mem.* 2.1.11), often that of sowing or ploughing (cf. the common betrothal formula in Menander γνησίωv παιδων έπ' άρότρωv (as in *Perik.* 435). Anacreon (PMG 417) likens a young woman to a Thracian filly, who has not yet tasted the bit, and envisages himself applying it to her and

meant to detain oneself in a primitive state of wildness. The list of mythical examples of women who acquire wild features due to the postponement of marriage (i.e. sexual intercourse) is long.⁴¹ Accordingly, the young women in *Lysistrata*, who have lived for a long time outside the context of marriage (or in an interrupted state of marriage), reveal a wild, violent and almost masculine disposition, not unlike the female patients in the medical texts and the unwed women in mythology. Two particular groups are most pertinent, because they are mentioned in *Lysistrata* as role-models for the young women:⁴² the Lemnian women and the Amazons. The fire the men carry is a Lemnian one (300), while the women's actions are comparable to the Amazons' attack on the city (676-9). The obvious point of the comparison is the women's savage and violent behaviour against the men and the magistrate.⁴³ Although the guard of the Acropolis consists of the old women, it is Lysistrata that warns the magistrate of retaliation if the archer so much as touches her (435-6) and it is her lead that the old women follow when threatening the Proboulos (439-40, 443-4, 447-8). She further warns the magistrate that the young women inside

taming her. In Eur. *Hipp.* 545-53, the unwed Iole (πῶλον ἄζυγα λέκτρων) who is yoked (ζεύξασ') for marriage by Aphrodite is likened to a footloose Naiad or a Bacchant; cf. Soph. *Tr.* 536 where Iole is ἐξενγμένην and lines 31-3, where Deianeira compares Heracles to a farmer who ploughs a field that he visits only at the time of sowing and the time of harvest. Cf. Soph. *Ant.* 477-8. In [Xen]. *Oik.* 7.10 the παρθένος needs to be "tamed" (ἐτετιθάσεντο) before a man can even carry on a conversation with her. See Loraux 1987: 36; Calame 1977: 411-20, 330-3; King 1998: 77. Cf. also the representations on vases of young ephebes hunting the fleeing girl (see Sourvinou-Inwood 1991: 25-143). Bowie 1993: 179 notes that "many of the motifs that are found on these vases are to be encountered in Pi. *Py.* 9 with its account of Apollo's marriage to the wild girl Cyrene".

⁴¹ Atalante's flight from marriage (Theognis 1283-94) is represented by a physical removal from the civilized sphere to wilderness. See Detienne (1979) 31-2; Segal (1981) 31; Lewis (1985) 214-6. The marginality of the unmarried (84 ἄδματοι) daughters of Proetus (Bacchylides 11) is expressed in familial, spatial, and biological codes, as they are punished by Hera to wander in the mountains. See Segal (1981) 35-6. Likewise, the Danaids, who flee from marriage, are compared by the king of Argos to the Amazons, "the unwed women who devour raw flesh" (Aesch. *Supp.* 287 τὰς ἀνάνδρους κρεοβότους τ' Ἀμαζόννας).

⁴² For the structural parallels between the myths and the play see Bowie (1984) and (1993) 184-95; Martin (1987).

⁴³ Both groups of women are typically portrayed as savage due to their state of anti-marriage: the Lemnian women (A.R. *Arg.* 1.636) are assimilated to the Thyiades who devour raw flesh. See Detienne (1994) 91-2. Diodorus (3.52ff.) describes the Amazon society as reversing aspects of normal Greek life. In Herodotus (4.110-7), the Amazons appear more civilized: although they refuse to spin and weave, they take Scythians as their husbands. The concession of Amazons to marriage may explain their civility in Herodotus' account. Cf. Hom. *Il.* 3.189 and 6.186 Ἀμαζόνες ἀντιάνειραι; A. *Pr.* 723-4 ἐνθ' Ἀμαζόνων στρατὸν/ῆξεις στῦλ' ἄν' ὀπ'. See also Bowie (1993) 184, who notes that the myth of the defeat of the Amazons by Theseus represented the victory of civilization over savagery.

the Propylaia are armed and ready to fight (452-4);⁴⁴ when she summons them, they attack the men most violently (459-60 οὐχ ἔλξετ', οὐ παιήσετ', οὐκ ἀράξετε;/οὐ λοιδορήσετ', οὐκ ἀναισχυντήσετε; "Tackle them! Hit them! Smash them! Call them names, the nastier the better!"). The women have a lot of χολή in them (464-5, cf. 691 ὑπερχολῶ). According to the men, the women have indeed turned into beasts and monsters⁴⁵ (468 θηρίοις, 476 κνωδάλοις).

Most importantly, the savagery of the young women is placed in a highly sexualized context: the description of the Amazons sitting on their horses (679) follows naturally the men's reference to the "equestrian" position the women occupy during sexual intercourse (677 ἵππικώτατον γάρ ἐστι χρῆμα κάποχον γυνή, "there's nothing like a woman when it comes to mounting and riding"). The same coital position is implied by the verbs ναυμαχεῖν and πλεῖν earlier on (675).⁴⁶ Thus, the old men compare the young women to their mythical counterparts on the basis of the female sexual appetite, which is hard to be managed and controlled (678), and, in this case, has turned against men. In the eyes of the men, the women are ὕβρισταί (399 ὕβρις, 400 ὕβρίκασι, 425 ὕβρεως). Although the word ὕβρις has a wide range of meanings, in comedy ὕβριζειν means "be virile" or "treat roughly during the sexual act".⁴⁷ The women exhibit both virility and lust.⁴⁸

The Proboulos also links the savage behaviour of the women to a lack of sexual restraint. He sees the women as the worshippers of orgiastic cults (387 τυμπανισμός, 388 πυκνοί Σαβάζιοι) which he conflates with the ritual

⁴⁴ The ἔνδον (454) and ἐνδοθεν (456) show that Lysistrata speaks about the young women who occupy the Acropolis and not the old helpers. See Henderson (1987a) 123 "the occupying women defend themselves just as had the chorus of old women".

⁴⁵ Since it is the young women who have just attacked the men, the men's characterizations refer both to the young women and the old ones: the former attack violently the Proboulos and the archers, while the latter give them an unwelcome bath.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Lys.* 59-60; *Ve.* 502; *Pax* 900ff.; *Eup.* fr. 268; *Anaxil.* fr. 22.1.10. See also Henderson (1987a) 160; Sommerstein (1990) 192-3.

⁴⁷ Accordingly, at *Eub.* 67.9 ὕβρις means "crude lust" and at *Pi. P.* 10.36 ὕβριν ὀρθίαν κνωδάλων is the erect phallus (see Henderson 1991: 159). Cf. *E. Ba.* 743-4 for the hubris of the bull, which Cairns (1996) 23 sees as its exuberant sexual energy, being the most "masculine" of all animals. Cf. also Xenophon, *Cyr.* vii 5.62-3, where castration cures the hubris of horses, which cease to bite, bulls, which cease to disobey, and dogs, which don't desert their masters anymore.

⁴⁸ For uses of ὕβρις in the sense of sexual degradation, see *Aesch.* 1.29,87; *Dem.* 19.309. See also Dover (1978) 34-9, esp. 36: "a man of strong sexual appetites, more shameless, importunate and headstrong in pursuit of their satisfaction than society regarded was acceptable was *hubristēs*".

of the Adonia.⁴⁹ All the women care about is sexual pleasure (387 τρυφή, 388 Ἀδωνιασμός, 398 ἀκολαστάσματα).⁵⁰ This impression is reinforced by his subsequent complaint about the way men encourage the lewdness of their wives (403-19): what he sees is a group of misbehaved, sexually depraved (or deprived) women.

The denunciation of women as rowdy and lustful is of course not an uncommon occurrence in comedy. But this is more than standard comic stereotyping. Ironically, the women who have barricaded themselves in the Acropolis to abstain from sex are accused of sexual licentiousness – a most absurd accusation. Yet, according to the men their behaviour cannot but be sexually related; to their minds, sex deprivation is connected with the women's unrestrained conduct. It is important that the women's behaviour is problematized by the *men* in the play – and, as one may imagine, also by the men in the audience. Just as the hermeneutic stance that the Hippocratic texts adopt is shaped by the preconceptions and the prejudices of their male writers against women, likewise, in Aristophanes, it is the men who find fault with the women.

The signs of pathology are also evident in the second half of the play, as the strike starts to bite the women. Lysistrata uses medical language to describe the women's state (715 βινητιώμεν) and to voice her complaints about the women's behaviour (709 ἀθυμεῖν). The verb ἀθυμέω and its cognates are not attested anywhere else in Old Comedy, but are commonly found in the Hippocratic corpus. In three instances ἀθυμία is used to describe one of the side-effects of women who suffer from a gynaecological condition, such as the wandering womb or bile-coloured menses.⁵¹ Thus, the uncommon use of the word in Old Comedy may point to the pathological condition of the women.

The account of the attempted defections as well as the attempts of the women to escape on stage bring to the fore the relation between sexual abstinence, and issues of fertility and productivity. The scenes are loaded with sexual innuendos only to culminate in the delivery of a "baby". One of the women was caught picking open a hole by the grotto of Pan while another one tried to fly to Orsilochus' house on a sparrow (720-5). The opening of the hole creates a pretty transparent sexual image; the sparrow is Aphrodite's bird, while the name of Orsilochus is probably chosen

⁴⁹ On maenads and *tumpana*, see Dodds (1960). On the fusion of various ecstatic cults by the Proboulos see Reitzammer (2008) 289-90.

⁵⁰ About the meanings of τρυφή see Kurke (1992) 105. See also Henderson (1987a) 118; Reitzammer (2008) 288-9. According to Detienne's analysis (1994), the Adonia were associated with the celebration of seduction and short-lived sexual pleasure. See Reitzammer (2016) for a revision of Detienne's thesis.

⁵¹ *Mul.* 8.23, 154.6; *Virg.* 1.9.

deliberately for its phallic associations.⁵² Another woman who was trying to defect by hanging down from a pulley-cable brings to mind the disturbed young girls in the Hippocratic treatise (*Virg.* 1. 8-9, 34-5 (8.466)), who, being mad with unsatisfied sexual desire, become delirious and want to strangle themselves.⁵³ In the comic context the situation is rather reversed: the young woman may run the risk of strangling herself by accident in her attempt to go home and satisfy her sexual desire.

Three more women appear on stage, each with an excuse to go home: one wishes to spread fleeces on a bed and another wants to strip her flax (728-41) – again, both evidently sexual images.⁵⁴ In comic contrast with other Aristophanic scenes where women make up various excuses in order to sneak *out* of the house and cheat on their husbands with their lovers (*Ar. Thesm.* 481-9), the women's disease drives them *into* the house (724 οἶκαδε, 728 οἶκαδ', 736 οἶκοι) to have sex with their husbands, placing thus more emphasis on marriage and reproduction. The most important clue, however, comes from the third woman: she claims to be pregnant, yet she carries not a child but the helmet of Athena, to which she "gives birth" on stage (743-57). This sequence of events allows us to make some suggestions: it is vital that the image of sex leads to that of pregnancy and parturition. It could be that the women contemplate possible therapies for their condition, parturition being the most effective. On the other hand, the production of a helmet, not a baby, could signify the danger of sterility that the war creates and that the women wish to emphasize.⁵⁵

The young women in *Lysistrata* can thus be viewed as suffering from a sickness caused by abstention from sexual intercourse, which they attempt to cure, based on a homeopathic model, through more sexual abstinence. By applying this homeopathic remedy, the women effectively perpetuate the disruption of their marital life and succeed in transmitting their "disease" to their husbands. As soon as the sex strike is put into effect, men

⁵² See Henderson (1987a) 165. The scholia suggest that Orsilochos was a πορνοβοσκός and a μοιχός and Bowie (1993) 199 follows this interpretation.

⁵³ According to King (1993: 117-20), strangulation as a chosen mode of death by virgins is an identification with Artemis Strangled and is also culturally opposed to unwanted sex: women may strangle themselves to avoid rape or after being raped. Cf. the Danaids in Aeschylus' *Suppliants* who flee from marriage with their cousins and threaten Pelasgus that they will hang themselves on the altars (457-65). The description of the young women in *Lysistrata* as the swallows who flee the hoopoe's pursuit (770-1) is also reminiscent of the Danaids who are assimilated to timid doves escaping from the hawk (*A. Supp.* 223-5).

⁵⁴ See Henderson (1987a) 165-6.

⁵⁵ See Bowie (1993) 199.

are also portrayed as patients, who suffer from the lack of sexual intercourse and are in desperate need of their wives.

Men as patients: the failure of the phallus

Kinesias' appearance on stage is indicative of the success of the women's plan. He is παραπεπληγμένος (831) and suffers from convulsions (845 σπασμός, 846 τέτανος). Derivatives of the verb πλήσσω are very common in medical language, such as the word παράπληκτος which is common in the Hippocratic corpus as a word denoting paralysis.⁵⁶ In addition, both of the words σπασμός and τέτανος, although very rare in contemporary literature, and especially in poetry,⁵⁷ are commonly found in the Hippocratic corpus.⁵⁸ τέτανος, along with the more colloquial ροπαλισμός, is also used by Lysistrata to describe the sufferings their sex strike will inflict upon the men (553). The men in the chorus express their pity about Kinesias' condition in medical vocabulary (962 ποῖος γὰρ <ἔτ'> ἄν νέφρος ἀντίσχοι, "What kidney could bear it"): the verb ἀντέχειν is used in *De Fracturis* of the bodily organs in the sense of "withstand",⁵⁹ as here with νέφρος, a word which appears, with a few exceptions, only in medical contexts, especially in the singular. Kinesias now suffers from fresh pain (968 ὦ Ζεῦ, δεινῶν ἀντισπασμῶν, "Ah Zeus! The cramps attack anew!"): the previous σπασμός has come back more intense.

In the scene that follows the men gather together and complain about their sufferings. Their gathering echoes the women's secret assembly at the beginning of the play: then it was the women who were shown to suffer from lack of sex; now, it is the men's turn to suffer accordingly. The men's complaints are voiced in medical terms:

(987-8):
ἦ βουβωνιᾶς
ὑπὸ τῆς ὁδοῦ;

⁵⁶ [Hp.] *Aër.* 10. Cf. also παραπληγίαι in *Epid.* 1.2.8, 2.2.24, 2.3.1, παραπληγικοί in *Epid.* 6.7.1 and παραπληκτικὸν τρόπον, which is interestingly accompanied by convulsions, just as in *Lysistrata: Epid.* 1.3.13 δεξιὴν χεῖρα παρελύθη μετὰ σπασμοῦ, παραπληκτικὸν τρόπον, "the right arm was paralyzed, with a convulsion, after the manner of a stroke" and *Prorrh.* 1.118 τὰ ἐξ ὀσφύος ἐς τράχηλον καὶ κεφαλὴν ἀναδιδόντα, παραλύσαντα παραπληκτικὸν τρόπον, σπασμῶδεα, παρακρουστικά, "paralyses that move up from the loins to the neck and head, disabling in the manner of apoplexy, lead to convulsions and delirium".

⁵⁷ τέτανος is found in Plato (*Ti.* 84e) and Aristotle (*HA*604b4); σπασμός in Herodotus (4.187) and Thucydides (2.49), and also in Sophocles *Tr.* 805, 1082, under Hippocratic influence.

⁵⁸ For instance, *Aph.* 2.26; 5.25; 7.13. See Miller (1945) 83.

⁵⁹ See Henderson (1987a) 183.

Got a swollen groin from the long ride, maybe?

(1078-9):

βαβαί· νενεύρωται μὲν ἤδ' <ή> συμφορὰ
δεινῶς τεθερμῶσθαι τε χεῖρον φαίνεται.

Wow! This condition has grown terribly tense, and looks to be inflamed worse than before.

The verb βουβωνιάω comes from βουβών, which ordinarily signifies the groin, but here it most probably indicates a swollen gland, as is its most common usage in medicine (cf. Hp. *Aph.* 4.55). Like βινητιῶμεν (715) earlier, the verb falls under a category of verbs, coined probably by Aristophanes himself, which end in -ᾶν or -ιᾶν and are used to signify disease or a sickly condition.⁶⁰ The two other verbs (νενεύρωται, τεθερμῶσθαι) also derive from a medical background: the men are afflicted as by an inflamed limb.⁶¹ The impression of the disease is reaffirmed by the use of words meaning “sickness” (1085 νοσήματος, 1088 νόσος) and the repetition of the word σπασμός (1089). Even more suggestively, the constantly erect phallus is not proudly exhibited as a sign of manliness and virility, as commonly happens in the comic context: in every extant play before *Lysistrata* (except for *Clouds*) the phallus marks the male protagonist’s vigour and final triumph, and becomes almost a validation of his power and new political order.⁶² In these contexts the large, erect phallus of the comic hero takes on positive valences and in no way can be interpreted as laughable.⁶³ Yet, in *Lysistrata*, the men are ashamed of their erect phalluses and try to hide them under their clothes or explain them away (985-94, 1082-5). The symbol of male pride in its full vigour must now be covered because it is a κακόν, a terrible disease which tortures men.⁶⁴ Not only are the men anxious to hide their erections, they are also afraid of impending castration (1093-4 εἰ σωφρονεῖτε, θαιμάτια λήψουσθ’ / ὅπως τῶν Ἑρμοκοπιδῶν μή τις ὑμᾶς ὀψεται, “if you’ve got any sense, you’ll cover up there: you don’t want one of the Herm-Docker clan to spot you”) and rush to cover themselves up

⁶⁰ Cf. 472 κυλοιδιᾶν. For these verbs see Miller (1945) 76; Willi (2007) 85-6.

⁶¹ See Henderson (1987a) 193.

⁶² See *Ach.* 787, 1216-21; *Eq.* 1391-3; *V.* 1343-4; *Pax* 1351-2; *Av.* 1253-6, 1759-62. Cf. *Th.* 643-8, where the Inlaw most disgracefully hides his phallus, so that he appears a proper woman. In most of the aforementioned examples the state of the phallus may well have been visible to the audience. See Stehle (2000) 374-6.

⁶³ See Foley (2000) 297.

⁶⁴ The erect phallus takes on a negative valour: 988 ἀλεός, 1002 μογίομες, 1003 ἐπικεκόφαμες, 1090 ἐπιτετρίμμεθα, 1097 αἰσχρὰ γ’ ἐπάθομεν, 1098 δεινὰ γ’ αὐτὸν πεπόνθαμεν.

(1096).⁶⁵ Later on, the men ambassadors let the women drag them by their erect phalluses (1119-21), a most insulting gesture.⁶⁶

Even more suggestive is the place that the manifestation of the men's side-effects occupies in the text. Kinesias appears on stage right after we have caught a glimpse of the women's illness, so that the association between the two conditions is unmistakable. Men are shown to suffer as a result of their wives' condition. They explicitly point out as the cause of their disease the women's vaginas (998-1001):

οὐκ, ἀλλ' ἄρξε μέν, οἶώ, Λαμπιτώ,
ἔπειτα τᾶλλαι ται κατὰ Σπάρταν ἀμᾶ
γυναῖκες ἄπερ ἀπὸ μιᾶς ὑσπλαγίδος
ἀπηλλάαν τὼς ἄνδρας ἀπὸ τῶν ὑσάκων⁶⁷

No, the one who started it, I reckon, was Lampito, and then
the other women in Sparta all together, starting all at once,
kept the men off their pussies.

As the women's biological malfunction is felt by men and they experience a similar pain, they are forced to reconsider their decisions about the war.

Illness as a metaphor

In *Lysistrata* the blend of literal and allegorical medical language suggests an association between the disease of the individuals and the failings of the body politic.⁶⁸ This is not uncommon in Aristophanic comedy: in *Wasps*, Bdelycleon addresses jury service not only as the disease from which his father suffers, as mentioned several times earlier in the play,⁶⁹ but also as a disease inbred in the city (651 νόσον ἀρχαίαν ἐν τῇ

⁶⁵ This warning coming from the old men is particularly ironic, since in the preceding scenes (614ff.) they attempted to exhibit their manliness and superiority over the women by removing their clothes.

⁶⁶ Cf. *Eq.* 771-2; *Eccl.* 1019-20, where the gesture of being dragged by the penis is equally degrading for the man who submits to it. By contrast, in *Ach.* 1216 Dicaeopolis most happily welcomes and invites the gesture by his female companions.

⁶⁷ For the meaning of this word as female genitals see Henderson (1987a) 186.

⁶⁸ Of course, the metaphor of the sick city appears early in literature (Solon 4.17, Thgn. 1133-4) and becomes something of a common place or a political trope. See Mitchell-Boyask (2008) 3 who claims that "the specific metaphor of the sick city, which appears several times before 430, becomes particularly potent during the plague and then newly powerful as the political unity of Athens begins to fail during the subsequent decade". See also Brock (2013) 69-70.

⁶⁹ For instance, *V.* 71, 76, 87, 114, 121-4.

πόλει ἐντετακυῖαν, “an inveterate sickness endemic to the city”).⁷⁰ In *Wealth*, the healing of the blind god Ploutos is inextricably linked with the healing of the *polis*. There perhaps,⁷¹ as well as in *Frogs*,⁷² Aristophanes recommends himself as the healer of the νοσοῦσα city: the city is sick, in bad labour (1423 ἡ πόλις γὰρ δυστοκεῖ, “the city is in a difficult labour”) and Dionysus chooses to resurrect the poet who will give the best advice so as to save the city, (1418-9); for the duty of the good poet, Aristophanes suggests, is to make people better in the cities (1008-9).

The vocabulary of illness is used also in *Lysistrata* as a metaphor for the problematic state of the city: young men are scarce, since they are away or have been killed at war (588-90), and young women are deprived of their men or cannot get married at all (591-7); under these circumstances procreation is interrupted. The young and most vital forces are condemned to death or idleness. In this sense, the city is “sick”. The cure of the disease is found in the “patients” themselves, since it consists in the re-establishment of normal sexual activity between husbands and wives.⁷³ As the Athenian ambassador says, everyone is now in favour of a “fucking policy”, since they all suffer from painful erections (1178-80). After a unanimous agreement (1180-1), Lysistrata urges the men to exchange oaths and pledges and allows them to take their wives home (1182-7, 1273-8). The oaths can be understood in two ways: they are the oaths of peace, but at the same time the oaths of marriage, which are now renewed, since the “fucking” policy is essentially the peace policy. The play ends with the reunion of husbands and wives. As soon as the normative situation has been officially restored, the symptoms of physical distress appear no more: this is the indication that the cure of the city (restoration of peace) comes about together with the cure of its people (restoration of normal marital relations).

Conclusion

The role of the young women is very important in the women’s assertion of power. In view of the contemporary medical theories, it

⁷⁰ As Reckford (1977) 298 observes on these lines “the longtime, deeply ingrained disease of Philocleon merges with that of Athens”. See also Brock (2000) 24; Kosak (2000) 46; Mitchell-Boyask (2008) 38.

⁷¹ As Mitchell-Boyask (2008) 188 has argued, the ultimate healer of the god Ploutos and the city, is Aristophanes himself “who presents a “vision” of a newly wealthy Athens to his audience”.

⁷² See Mitchell-Boyask (2008) 188.

⁷³ This is in line with the concept of political/medical imagery in the 6th and 5th centuries, where the figure of the doctor is absent and it is the patient who occupies the central position. See Brock (2013) 76.

becomes evident that more is at stake than mere satisfaction of sexual appetites. The sex-strike leads to the malfunction of the women's reproductive system, which could be catastrophic for the health of the whole community. The women's claim to leadership takes on a serious tone as it is made to resonate with their vital contribution to civic welfare in the reproduction and provision of children.⁷⁴ The women manage to prevail because they threaten men (and the city) with sterility and cessation of reproduction. The notoriously infinite appetite of women for sex, so often ridiculed in comedy, has turned from a sign of female lewdness and weakness to a strong weapon. Moreover, it has uncovered a similar and equal need for sexual gratification in the men, who are the first to succumb to their urges.

This reading subscribes to a cultural feminist approach, whose key point is that female anatomy is the primary constituent of women's identity and the source of female essence and power. Adrienne Rich talks about a "female consciousness" that is strongly related to the female body:⁷⁵

"the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. The feminist vision has recoiled from female biology for these reasons; it will, I believe, come to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny. ... We must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence".

Accordingly, in *Lysistrata* the women's power is based on an essentialist interpretation of traditional gender roles (women as wives and mothers/nurturers), and on a "reclaiming of life-loving female energy".⁷⁶ Although the valorization of these attributes is developed under a state of oppression, every performance of feminism should be evaluated within the historical period in which it was produced. At a time that women were conceptualized as voracious and uncontrollable in emotion and appetite, the use of the women's "natural" attributes of creativity, reproduction and

⁷⁴ Cf. the old women's proud claim that they are fully entitled to express an opinion about the city, since they contribute men to it (648-55). The female rituals they refer to (638-47) are all strongly related to their roles as wives and mothers.

⁷⁵ Rich (1977) 21.

⁷⁶ Daly (1987) 355.

nurture in substantiation of their authority, and being set apart from men on account of these attributes, is a moral victory.

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